Hod Marks

Nationalism, the patriotic feelings people have for others that share their language, values and culture, played a major role in the 1800s in either forming or destroying an independent country. Between 1848 to 1914, this social movement caused the unification of various territories into a powerful Germany and the decimation of Austria’s once powerful empire into a weak dual-monarchy.

As a result of generations of Holy Roman Emperors giving power to princes throughout Germany, the German regions became very hard to unite. This was because Germany was divided into many different independent territories. However, Prussian leader, Otto van Bismarck, was able to use nationalism in his favor in order to unify Germany. As a Realpolitik, the unification of Germany was Bismarck’s number one goal. He was able to promote German nationalism by starting wars with countries that wanted to take control over German territories. As soon as the common people in Germany read in the press that France and Austria wanted to control them, they felt inclined to unite with their fellow Germans and protect their land. As a result Germany became larger and larger and began to conquer other territories such as Denmark, Alsace and Loraine, Strasburg, and Metz. By 1880, Germany became unified into a federation of 22 European kingdoms and although it was much smaller than Britain, who had the largest navy in the world, it had the 2nd largest navy in the world by 1914. Nationalism was a key contributor to the unification and strengthening of Germany.

On the other hand, nationalism took its toll on the Austrian empire and weakened it immensely. Metternich, the architect of the concert of Europe, ensured that there would be a balance of powers in Europe after Napoleon’s rule. By hosting their gatherings in Austria, he was able to strengthen his country. Nationalism, however, posed a huge threat to Metternich and Austria’s dominance. This was because Austria was composed of so many different nationalities—Germans, Czechs, Poles, Croats, Serbs, Slovaks, Italians and Hungarians—all of who wanted to gain independence so they could become a self-governing state. Before 1867, Austria was mainly dominated by the German Habsburgs, and later the Austrian Germans; however, after they were defeated in the Seven Weeks War, they had to share power with the Hungarians and became a “Dual Monarchy” state. This weakened Austria greatly because of the constant disagreement between the Austrians and Hungarians. This also caused many revolts throughout the country because other nationalities also wanted to gain power just like the Hungarians. Nationalism gave hope to different groups of people throughout Europe and the world to join together and fight for their independence. But it was this belief that caused all of the interior revolts that caused Austria’s once powerful empire to collapse.

In conclusion, nationalism was a very powerful tool in the 19th century. Depending on the hands in which it was in, it could be used to unify territories and create a powerful dominating country, or bring upon the downfall of a major power. Otto van Bismarck was able to stir up nationalism throughout the German lands to create one of the most powerful countries in Europe. Perhaps if Metternich would have used the same tactics as the Realpolitik, he could have succeeded in preventing the Austrian Empire from falling apart.